

It's time to take a unified approach toward measuring sustainability

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Ask any political leader if they are in favor of sustainability, and the pat answer is typically a resounding, "Yes."

Evaluating its effectiveness, however, is a much trickier endeavor. Thomas Dietz, a sociology and [environmental science](#) and policy professor at Michigan State University, took steps to indentify a universal framework to evaluate [sustainability](#) at a national gathering of scientists Feb. 20.

Measuring progress and evaluating proposals require identifying indicators that are valid and reliable. The desire to have such protocols has been around for years, but establishing criteria for measurement is a recent development, Dietz said. During the American Association for the Advancement of Science annual conference in Washington, D.C., Dietz led a discussion of international experts to review recent advances and address the strengths and weaknesses of current practices.

"We found that there are many different methods around the globe that are running relatively independently of one another," said Dietz, who organized the workshop with Eugene Rosa of Washington State University. "By bringing together the top researchers of leading sustainability measures, our goal is to establish a synthesis that will lead to common language and measurements to help the world evaluate whether sustainability efforts are succeeding or failing."

The experts featured during the session were:

- Mathis Wackernagel, creator of the Ecological Footprint concept
- Jay Emerson and Marc Levy, principal investigators of the [Environmental Performance](#) Index
- Kirk Hamilton, leads the World Banks' approach known as Genuine Savings
- Charles Seaford, creator of the Happy Planet Index
- Marina Fischer-Kowalski, lead proponent of National Material Flow Accounting

"By design, we were able to bring together researchers from many disciplines from around the world," Dietz said. "We were really fortunate to get the leaders of the five most-prominent measures."

The unifying theme of sustainability is human well-being, how it impacts the environment and the tradeoffs of the two. While some methods focus on economics, others place higher emphasis on the environment and some do both. Yet all are complementary and wrestling with the same overarching goals, Dietz added.

"Some of the concepts are new, and others have been around a while but are becoming more sophisticated and more widely accepted," he said. "With solid data now available from most every country, which makes side-by-side comparisons easier, we felt it was the perfect time to bring everyone together to hopefully begin unifying our efforts on an international scale."

Provided by Michigan State University

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